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Edited by Mark Hearn and Grant Michelson

Excerpt

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CHAPTER ONE

GOING TO A NEW PLACE

Rethinking Work in the 21st Century

Mark Hearn and Grant Michelson

In her contribution on international work and management, labour geographer Susan McGrath-Champ describes the experience of an expatriate manager setting up a plant in China as ‘going to a new place’: an abrupt and challenging shift in experience that is at once cultural and spatial, driven by the forces reshaping international capital and work organisation. *Rethinking Work* argues that work researchers must also explore new territory – engaging with challenging analytical categories to explain the rapidly evolving and multi-dimensional realm of 21st-century work.

The multidisciplinary nature of Work and Organisational Studies (WOS) at the University of Sydney has stimulated an innovative analysis of work, industrial relations, human resource management, organisations and management. *Rethinking Work* is a product of this diverse and collaborative research environment. Drawing on expertise in strategic management, discourse and narrative analysis, organisational theory, labour and business history, labour geography and the study of unions, gender and human resource management, the contributors reject a narrowly conceived approach to the study of work and employment relations. Work and workplace issues must be sensitive to the historical and contemporary context of management decision-making and organisational behaviour if they are adequately to explain and understand the internal and external forces that drive action and choice.

Rethinking Work reflects recent changes within the areas of industrial relations, human resource management and organisation studies.

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[More information](#)

RETHINKING WORK

Many of the contributors formerly worked in the Department of Industrial Relations, established by pioneering industrial relations academic Kingsley Laffer in 1953. The University of Sydney was the first Australian tertiary education institution to establish a dedicated industrial relations discipline, which developed and grew in staff numbers over the ensuing decades. The sweeping restructuring of the world of work since the 1980s – the shift to labour market deregulation and a more intensive focus on human resource issues and organisational analysis – rendered its traditional nomenclature too narrowly focused. In 2000 the department was renamed ‘Work and Organisational Studies’ and was located within a newly formed School of Business. Since this time WOS has experienced considerable growth in staff numbers. This transformation represents a broader and more innovative approach to studying the world of work. In particular, members of WOS seek to showcase to practitioners, students and scholars in other institutions the important principles that are now required in understanding more comprehensively all issues pertaining to work. In doing so, we argue that this book helps to identify and establish a uniquely ‘Sydney School’ approach to studying work and the employment relationship.

The structure of the chapter is as follows. First, we outline the major changes in work and the organisation of work over the last 15 or so years. Many of these developments are not exclusive to Australia but also reflect changes experienced in other industrialised economies. This backdrop is presented to argue why we need to construct and use more analytically robust and sophisticated tools to understand and explain the changes. In the second section, the three themes of time, space and discourse are introduced. While not all are ‘new’ in the study of work matters, what is new is that these themes are brought together for the first time in one place to illuminate issues in the fields of industrial relations, human resource management and work organisation. We are mindful that a comprehensive understanding of the numerous and important work changes requires more than merely presenting or privileging one theme over another. Rather, and this is the purpose of the third section, the concepts of time, space and discourse are presented in an integrated fashion. Thus although the different chapters have been classified according to one of the three organising themes or devices, in practice there is considerable overlap and there is a need to draw on two or more themes simultaneously.

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CHANGING WORK: NEO-LIBERALISM AND
THE ANALYSIS OF WORK

In recent years, work and working life in Australia have undergone significant social and economic change (or 'fragmentation') in terms of industry restructuring, the shift from a rather centralised system towards a more decentralised system, the growth of non-standard (part-time and casual) forms of employment, a rise in individualism, longer and more intense hours of work, more limited prospects for skill development and training, and an increasing wage gap between the top and bottom ends of the labour market, to name but a few of these changes (ACIRRT 1999; Deery & Mitchell 1999; Callus & Lansbury 2002; Watson et al. 2003). Accompanying such changes, many of which have reflected developments evident in other countries, have been debates about the future role for the traditional workplace actors and institutions – trade unions, employer associations and industrial tribunals (for example Peetz 1998; Sheldon & Thornthwaite 1999; Dabscheck 2001) – and about how individuals might balance better their work and non-work lives (Pocock 2003).

Furthermore, changes in the world of work are increasingly being viewed through a different lens that reveals a preoccupation with the neo-liberal notions of flexibility, innovation, productivity and competitiveness. Such themes have arguably overtaken the traditional industrial relations concerns of equity, workplace justice and the regulation of conflict among public policy-makers and managers alike (Hearn & Lansbury 2005). In Australia, as elsewhere, there has been a reshaping of national policy priorities towards encouraging greater competitiveness and efficiency through such mechanisms as works councils and partnership programs (Gollan et al. 2002; Gollan & Patmore 2003).

Such changes have precipitated uneven consequences among different industries and for the field of employment relations in Australia more generally (Kitay & Lansbury 1997; Lansbury & Michelson 2003, 2005). In the broader international context, they have spurred an interest among researchers to expand the focus of enquiry to global trends in work and employment such as the rise of the service sector, the shift to an information or knowledge society, and developing better theoretical explanations of the observed phenomena (for example Warhurst & Thompson 1998; Giles 2000; Kaufman 2004). For other scholars, the changes in work and the organisation of work have further blurred and eroded disciplinary boundaries and it is argued that there is a greater

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

RETHINKING WORK

need for industrial relations to engage with cognate social science areas such as law, history, economics, sociology and psychology (Ackers & Wilkinson 2003). Many earlier studies on work and how it is regulated have drawn on such disciplinary areas to present a range of insights (see, for example, Williams 1992; Ewing 1996; Richardson 1999; Hearn & Patmore 2001).

The present book similarly draws on the variety of disciplinary traditions to be found in the study of work. But unlike other publications which preserve and reinforce the bounded nature of these disciplines (for example Ackers & Wilkinson 2003), *Rethinking Work* synthesises the concepts of time, space and discourse to provide a fresh and innovative perspective on the study of work and employment relations.

Structuring *Rethinking Work* around the themes of time, space and discourse allows us to think in new ways about the organisation, management and regulation of work. It is true enough that these themes have been woven into past scholarship, and this book builds on these traditions, arguing that time, space and discourse have become increasingly powerful tools for unlocking the complexities of the world of work. While the content is largely based on developments in Australia, we contend that much of the empirical material speaks to, and will inform, the experiences of other countries. Contemporary debates, processes and events in Australia such as those surrounding the organisation and regulation of work, workplace change, employee institutions, workplace groups (migrants and older workers) and the articulation of normative ethical values at work, for instance, are also highly relevant in other parts of the world, as the concluding chapter by Tim Morris attests.

Briefly, we define our working principles and outline some of the issues that arise from analysing work through these three categories.

NEW WAYS OF THINKING ABOUT WORK

Time

Although it has been the case that history, and labour history in particular, has been a core disciplinary strand in the study of work and employment relations, it has always had to fight for that place. This seems to remain the case. Time receives too little attention among contemporary scholars in spite of recent attempts by some to argue for a place for temporality in social settings (for example Bluedorn 2002; Epstein & Kalleberg 2004). Instead the focus is on an uninterrogated present

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[More information](#)

RETHINKING WORK IN THE 21ST CENTURY

and an imagined future disconnected from their links to the past. So much attention is paid to the rapidity of social change that the past seems indeed to be as remote as a totally different country – and yet arguments about rapid change are, ironically, pre-eminently arguments about time, history and the future. We can learn from the past in order to understand the present and anticipate the future.

Time is one of the major structuring devices for human activity, and there is considerable evidence of temporal order in industrialised societies (Adam 1990, 1995). As Greg Patmore argues in Chapter 2, our deployment of time in a contemporary understanding of work must be rethought in a number of ways – in the blurred divisions of time between paid and unpaid work and leisure, and how time is not simply bestowed by nature or clock/calendar time but is organised by human agency, and is ‘socially constructed’. In other words, time is embedded in a range of social interactions, structures and practices. The social construction of time can be neatly illustrated by different experiences of time (‘time is dragging’ or ‘time passes quickly’) and different orientations across national cultures suggesting that all times are not the same (see Bluedorn 2002).

Time is frequently considered as a resource in the context of work and work organisation and, as such, contains an assumption of efficiency. This idea is captured and demonstrated for example, by the themes of ‘time management’ and ‘just-in-time’ and by the statement ‘gossip wastes time’. There is a desire by organisations to allocate time, part of which involves the need to impose discipline based on clock-time in order to maximise productive activity (Thompson 1967). This includes turning up to work ‘on time’. However, this construction is not without its difficulties and we acknowledge the existence of a number of time-related ‘problems’ including the time of work (long work hours), the timing of work (the arrangement of working time), work–life balance, work stresses (‘running out of time’), nostalgia (a desire to ‘live in the past’), and the politics of time. On this last point, it is important to recognise that time has an essentially ‘political’ dimension in terms of whose time is valued in our work organisations and how this is established. Contesting the amount of work and employee control of work timing is also inherently a political struggle. Of course, this is not to deny the importance of linear time in different social contexts (Rehn 2002). But it does help to illustrate that time is more complex than is often assumed and contains both ‘objective’ and socially constructed features.

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

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In addition to the politicised element of time, we also see the value of employing time in further illuminating some more familiar concepts in the work and industrial relations literature, such as gender. How is time constructed by women when they are more likely to experience absences from the labour market to have children? To what extent do men and women have shared or different understandings of time with respect to their careers? Among professional workers in one study, the perception that working long hours could be a vehicle for career progression was endorsed more frequently by men than by women; for women, time spent at work reflected a sense of professional conscientiousness. For both men and women in this study, however, work time was an expression of professional and personal identity, suggesting that working long hours may not be always be in conflict with work–life balance (Sturges 2004). Questions such as these do not negate the importance of gender in explaining work-related outcomes, but they do raise the possibility that other dimensions can enhance our understanding of the more commonly employed analytical categories. A time perspective can indeed help us explain many developments in work and employment relations. Accordingly, we privilege time as one of the three organising themes or devices in this book.

Space

Arguments in and about the world of work ‘take place’, we habitually say, in particular settings such as factories and offices. But we quickly move on from this evocative phrase without thinking much more about these spaces. How are spaces in and around work constructed and how do they interact with work, organisations and regulation? Echoing the view of others that space should have a more central position in analysis (for example Ellem & Shields 1999: 537), space is therefore the second of our major structuring devices to understand work, the organisation of work and employment relations.

While space is sometimes treated as synonymous with place in the literature, it is not limited to this interpretation. Space is not a ‘given’ where it is to be treated merely as a static environmental factor in research studies; rather, different societies organise, structure and reproduce space in different ways (Herod et al. 2003). Such spaces are often taken for granted and can communicate important symbolic and power elements in social contexts. Taking but one familiar example, the

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[More information](#)

RETHINKING WORK IN THE 21ST CENTURY

allocation of 'office space' (how much and where) can send messages to others about the relative status of individuals in work organisations (Baldry 1999). In addition, this can structure social action as well as act as a source of conflict. How space is partitioned, therefore, can provide insights into how we partition work, the world of work and employment relations. One such term that has recently helped to shape research in the field is 'globalisation'.

The rise of globalisation – a term as little defined as it is commonly deployed – makes very clear that the remaking of, and rethinking about, work is a spatial process. It is not simply an objective term but a process with multiple layers of social meaning. Changes 'take place' in different ways across both time and space and we need to understand how spatial specificity is configured or set up at the workplace, at local, regional and national scales within the global restructuring of economic and social life. Debates about the future of work need to acknowledge a number of these factors (Morris 2004).

It is also important to understand the links between these different spatial scales as well as how individuals and organisations might both 'manage' as well as resist changes in space. An illustration of this might be how many business organisations in Australia, in response to various global and national pressures, are relocating their operations partly or wholly offshore, establishing new 'greenfield' sites in other parts of the country with different employment conditions from older, more established sites, or offering some workers the option of family-friendly employment practices via working from home. However, these initiatives have not always proceeded smoothly as different groups at work have sought to reconstitute and challenge the space in which work 'takes place'. For some employees, this might involve establishing greater solidarity with others across different spaces such as through international labour networks or links with the wider community. In other words, spaces can be subjectively made and remade and are not simply the geographic context or setting in which work occurs. The remaking of space reveals the struggles or contests over how managers and employees pursue their interests at work, in turn reflecting the typically uneven patterns of how capital and labour are organised (Ellem & Shields 1999; Herod et al. 2003).

In addition to the more common localised spaces of the factory or office and, increasingly, the home, there is also evidence now of more work being carried out in a 'third place' such as the train, car and plane, suggesting that there is a mosaic of contrasting work spaces (Felstead

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

RETHINKING WORK

et al. 2005: 428). New technologies such as mobile phones and laptop computers have begun to usher in a change in the places where work can be carried out. This has arguably helped to foster a new language and space associated with the 'virtual organisation' and 'networked organisation'. Work and employment relations appear to be undergoing something of a transformation in their location. Again, such shifts are symptomatic of wider changes in the landscapes and mobilities of capital and labour. An understanding of the spatial dimension is therefore critical to generating more rigorous and nuanced explanations of the changes in work, including how different actor groups shape the practice, experience and regulation of work.

Discourse

As they struggle to survive and expand within the context of globalising market forces, work and employment relations present us with a bewildering diversity of managerial strategies, policies and practices. In Part III we suggest that one way to make sense of progressively uncertain, inconsistent and fluctuating employee, managerial and organisational behaviour is for commentators to examine the ways in which discourses pertaining to work are produced, disseminated and consumed.

'Discourse' refers to the practices of talking and writing, the visual representations and the cultural artefacts that bring a range of social phenomena (objects) into being through a variety of texts (Grant et al. 2004). Texts can take many forms such as written documents, verbal reports and statements, terminology, symbols and signs. Discourse analysis involves the systematic study of these texts. A discourse does not start out in possession of meaning. Instead, and in line with their socially constructive effects, meaning is created, renegotiated and changed via interactions between different groups. This allows for a range of alternative meanings to be produced. In order to explain why particular discourses emerge or how meaning is established, as well as accounting for their effects, the historical contexts in which discourse arises must also be understood (Fairclough 1995). That is, when individuals use language they employ a variety of terms that have been provided by the past.

Discourse analysis is particularly useful in work settings, for instance to show how employees and managers construct meaning and their own reality (maybe to justify an action or to attribute blame). Discourse

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[More information](#)

RETHINKING WORK IN THE 21ST CENTURY

can be mobilised by different actor groups as a strategic resource, and this shapes and constructs outcomes in their favour (Hardy et al. 2000). These constructive processes help to further reveal and illuminate underlying power relations in social structures as dominant meanings associated with a particular discourse emerge by way of contestation (Grant & Hardy 2003). The dominant meaning occurs as alternative discourses are marginalised or subverted. However, this outcome is by no means secured as there is an ongoing struggle among competing discourses. In the current work and industrial landscape in Australia, these different discourses (for example those surrounding 'fairness' and 'more jobs') and how they are articulated represent the interests of different groups such as federal and State governments, employers, trade unions, industrial courts, legal practitioners, churches, welfare agencies and so on.

This point might be further shown in the shift from 'personnel management' to 'human resource management' (HRM). This change in terminology from around the mid-1980s was arguably an attempt to make people issues more central or strategic to business decision-making, and while HRM has certainly become the favoured nomenclature, the adoption of HRM in practice in Australia has been slow (Michelson & Kramar 2003). In part this is due to senior organisational managers being unwilling to cede strategic authority to human resource (HR) managers. Other language has recently begun to emerge which refers to the idea of 'human capital'. This latest development (which might or might not take hold in business circles) highlights the fluid and contested nature of discourse in work and other social contexts. We believe that asking apparently simple questions of discourses helps to lay bare the intricate dynamics of work. Accordingly, chapters in this section of the book ask questions such as who uses the particular discourse under scrutiny – and how and why? Tying these questions to the other themes in the book, it is also necessary to ask when and where particular discourses are used. In doing so, we believe that discourse opens up analytical space for new and innovative accounts of a range of work-related and employment-related issues.

INTEGRATING TIME, SPACE AND DISCOURSE

We also recognise that the categories of time, space and discourse should not be artificially polarised or advocated, even if some

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RETHINKING WORK

proponents make sweeping claims on behalf of their analytical preference. Herod (2002: 14) claims that social life is fundamentally spatial and has an ontological status: 'an active component in structuring social life' and 'a material product of human struggles to shape the space-economy and the geographical relationships between various industrial relations actors'. These views echo claims made in an influential text by Somers & Gibson (1998) about the links between narrative and identity: that 'social life is storied' and 'narrative is an ontological condition of social life'. They argue that narrative is fundamentally significant to all expressions of life, that experience and identity is constituted through narrative: 'people are guided to act in certain ways, and not others, on the basis of the projections, expectations, and memories derived from a multiple but ultimately limited repertoire of available social, public and cultural narratives' (Somers & Gibson 1998: 38–40). Similarly, others stake universal territory for organisational discourse: 'Organisations exist only in so far as their members create them through discourse', although these same writers partly qualify this broad assertion (Grant et al. 2004: 3).

Herod (2002: 14–15) goes on to implicitly link space, time and discourse. Technology, he argues, has sped up work production and information flows and restructured geographic relationships. Herod seems to tacitly concede that the category of space that he champions so strenuously (he challenges 'anyone' to disprove that social life is fundamentally spatial) is in fact inherently tied to a relationship both to time and indeed to 'information flows' – that is, discourse.

We seek to encourage research that explores the links and relationships between the temporal, spatial and discursive dimensions of work analysis. For instance, the discourse in studies of the employment relationship which evokes 'globalisation' in their argument is essentially a spatialised discourse that reconstructs the space in which work now takes place; the different spaces in which work is performed are affected by considerations of time as some individuals struggle to balance their work and non-work time; and how time as an object is understood and used in work and employment relations can be discursively constructed.

While the categories of time, space and discourse each require more rigorous analysis in their relationship with work, and cannot be simply added, as Herod says of space, to the explanatory mix as an afterthought, we acknowledge that research that constructs tight disciplinary